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## VI. Pere Calders and his Mexican Exile

### *Imperialism and the Fantastic: The Case of Pere Calders* Enric Bou

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# IMPERIALISM AND THE FANTASTIC: THE CASE OF PERE CALDERS

ENRIC BOU

*Cultural forms are hybrid, mixed,  
impure, and the time has come in cultural  
analysis to reconnect their analysis with  
their actuality.*

Edward SAID

In a recent and influential book, *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said proposed to take a new look at the relations between metropolis and (former) colonies from a cultural perspective. Said presented "a kind of geographical inquiry into historical experience" (7), according to which there are deep and subtle connections between literature and culture on the one hand, and imperialism on the other. Some of his findings may be used to read one aspect of Pere Calders' fiction which has received only summary attention. Amanda Bath has devoted an excellent study to Calders' fiction and its situation in contemporary European writing, but there is one aspect of Calders' work that may deserve a second look. I refer here to his Mexican stories and also to the influence that Mexico, as a cultural environment, had on the Catalan writer's fiction. Looking at this aspect of his work may open the door to a New World reading of Calders' fiction.

Bath focuses her attention on five short stories ("Fortuna lleu," "La vetlla de donya Xabela," "Primera part d'Andrade Maciel," "La verge de les vies," and "La batalla del cinc de maig"), the short novel *Aquí descansa Nevares*, and the novel *L'ombra de l'atzavara*, which presents the problems of Catalan exiles adapting to Mexican culture. She rightly quotes from Octavio Paz when trying to locate Mexico's specificities. According to the Mexican writer, there are three main traits which distinguish that country: stoicism towards fate and a tendency to hide inner feelings, because Mexicans do not walk, they slide; they do not put forward ideas, they insinuate them; they do not answer back, they grumble; they do not complain, they smile. (Paz, 1950 #1197 [36].) The second is a unique blending of both Catholicism and pagan traditions. And third is the attitude adopted by Mexicans towards death, because, instead of being forbidden from public life as it is the case in many cultures, it becomes an obsessive element of daily life, surprising foreigners. Many of these traits appear on multiple

occasions in Calders' fiction showing an explicit interest by the author in the country where he spent over twenty years at a crucial moment of his literary career.

It would be worthwhile to explore what was Calders' positioning vis-à-vis Mexican reality. In a declaration to Josep Faulí, Calders stated:

Mèxic m'influí poc. Com he explicat moltes vegades, jo hi feia una vida en règim d'estricta transitorietat. A més, treballava amb catalans, vivia amb catalans, em feia amb catalans, de manera que el contacte amb els mexicans era molt superficial... Amb tot, he d'admetre que la meua obra sense l'estada a Mèxic, fóra diferent, però no a causa del país que m'acolli, sinó d'haver marxat del meu: no hi influí Mèxic, sinó l'enyorament i, com a conseqüència, un desig d'evasió, de fugir de la realitat dura de cada dia. (Faulí, 1979 #196)

This declaration presents a position very different indeed from what Joan Melcion has constructed upon Calders' fiction and its relationship to Mexican reality. Melcion used these same words to emphasize the fact that Calders had utilized Mexican reality as a source of inspiration for new fictional materials, all the while experiencing a "distance" and a splitting of the day to day reality. In his well-known definition of Calders' attitude towards reality Melcion pointed out that the inner motivation of this work was:

L'ambigua relació que l'home manté respecte a la realitat humana, entesa aquesta com un principi ordenador de la conducta i de les funcions que l'individu *pot i deu* desenvolupar segons el paper que li hagi estat assignat. (Melcion 1980, 27)

He has also referred to a typical Calders' attitude of presenting a "tensió constant entre dues dimensions diferents de la ficció literària." (22). One which would be represented by the reality where the characters live, with certain norms and codes they have to accept; the second one a dream-reality where imagination and fantasy allow a reinterpretation of reality.

It is worth mentioning that Bath had second thoughts when applying this idea to Calders' Mexican short stories:

Tot i que la tesi de Melcion encaixa admirablement en les dinàmiques tensions presents a molta de la ficció madura de Calders, la seva rellevància pel que fa a les narracions mexicanes està encara per debatre. (Bath 125)

Why is that? Maybe, instead of a dichotomy between Indians and the rest of the society, it would be much more appropriate to speak of the Mexican society and the community of Catalan and Spanish exiles



which did not integrate themselves completely into the new country. In the introduction to *Aquí descansa Nevares* Calders had to explain his position and defend himself from those who considered his position as almost racist. Bath wrote on this subject:

Calders mostra una simpatia indulgent envers els defectes i el comportament a voltes infantil dels seus protagonistes, i si la seva actitud narrativa deixa algun cop entreveure un petit complex de superioritat, mai no esdevé flagrant o exagerada. Una bona part de l'humor d'aquests relats es fonamenta en la creació en el lector d'un petit complex de superioritat envers els personatges mexicans, bastit a través d'una ironia subtil. (132)

At any rate, and to be fair to Calders, one has to mention that he was acutely aware of the problematic approach to indian aspects of Mexican reality, as he stated in the introduction to *Aquí descansa Nevares*. In any case, his own position as observer is well defined in this sentence: "En el meu cas, vaig renunciar tant a redimir l'indi com a trobar-li totes les gràcies, perquè aviat va semblar que la cosa més raonable era deixar-lo tal com estava, que ell sol ja s'aniria esparpillant, si és que no ha estat una mostela tota la vida." (*Aquí descansa Nevares*, 39). It is nevertheless difficult to accept Melcion's interpretation of "Aquí descansa Nevares" as a rebellion "contra el seu mateix concepte de la realitat" (29). In my view it is quite obvious that Calders limits himself to present a shocking and paradoxal situation, but in the end he only can come up with a mild ironic joke when he compares the appearance of new city buildings to that of a cemetery:

Com un teló de fons massa gran per al seu minúscul drama, la ciutat a la qual s'acostaven anava teixint ciment i acer, posava llosa sobre llosa, per empresonar subtilment uns quants milions de persones que tenien, com ells dos, la il·lusió de les parets segures. (84)

That this part of Calders' work is problematic can be epitomized by the fact that Bath tries to come up with an explanation but she fails to do so. She recognizes that she is not able to construct a unifying theory about the Mexican short stories. She can only point out to the fact that these texts are written from

el simple desig de descriure l'enigma mexicà, d'explorar una actitud complexa i sovint paradoxal davant la vida que és exhibida no només pels indis mexicans, sinó també per individualitats que representen tots els nivells de la societat. Els seus relats són un tribut respectuós a un poble que ell admirava des d'un cert allunyament. (Bath 130)

The clue word that may help understand and define Calders'

position is "allunyament." Because one of the problems that arises from the previous Calders' declaration is the fact that he did not really integrate himself into the mainstream of Mexican life and culture. Which is fine. In fact, many critics oversee something very obvious: the fact that Calders, like many other exiles, decided not to integrate himself in Mexican society, as he stated in the novel *L'ombra de l'atzavara*.

Here it is necessary to stress two interrelated facts: Calders was living in exile and as many authors have stated this is a condition which produces extreme isolation; and these texts are extremely different, from a thematic and stylistic perspective, from the rest of his fictional work. According to Edward Said exile is "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home." ("The Mind of Winter" 49). Therefore exile situates a human being in some sort of no man's land where he or she does not belong. Separation is one of the clues of this experience, or in Calders' words, "allunyament." Exile produces the combination of two experiences, past and present, which interfere in the subject's interaction with reality: "exile, habits, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment." (Said, "The Mind of Winter" 55). Taking things a little bit further we could agree with Theodor Adorno when, in *Minima Moralia*, he relates the experience of exile with total loss: "It is a part of morality not to feel at home even in your own home" (39). Connecting all this with Calders' declaration to Josep Paulí things stand a little bit more clearer. It illuminates his position as observer, not as someone who decides to incorporate fully into the mainstream of Mexican cultural life. And as someone that does not feel at home not even in his own home country.

This situation can be more easily understood if we use a concept borrowed from anthropology. Liminality is a moment in life which Victor Turner defined as a moment "betwixt between," a moment which allows to suspend all norms in life, and to live above them. Being between one world and another, and nowhere in a definitive form.<sup>1</sup> This is what happens to people in exile and therefore they tend to live an ambivalent life based on liminality.

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Liminality is "a moment of suspension of normal rules, a crossing of boundaries and violating of norms, that enables us to understand those norms, even (or perhaps especially) where they conflict, and move on either to incorporate or reject them." Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (1908). Victor and Edith Turner have expanded this concept: "the state and process of mid-transition in a rite of passage. During the liminal period, the characteristics of the liminars (the ritual subjects in this phase) are ambiguous, for they pass through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. Liminars are betwixt and between" (249).



Secondly, and closely related to this, is another remarkable fact: of all Calders' texts, the ones he wrote while living in Mexico are the most realistic. It could even be said that in these stories Calders' sensibility is closer to that of the popular movie actor and director Mario Moreno "Cantinflas," who is extremely popular in Catalonia. These texts have nothing to do with the subtlety of his other works written when he returned to his native Catalonia. Maybe this contact with Mexican life, and the irrelevant short stories which derived have to be read as some kind of rite of passage that he had to endure. Calders was exploring new ways of expression, and at the same time he was exploiting whatever new situations and characters Mexican society offered him.

This can be understood if we read it from Edward Said's perspective. In his seminal *Culture and Imperialism* Said presents a version of imperialism and the many interconnections with culture. It is particularly beneficial when he writes: "Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons, but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imagining" (7). When Calders was living in Mexico he could not but experience the same feeling that any Spaniard feels: of how astonishing the mixture of Spanish elements with native ones is. And for a Catalan writer the experience is even more striking and powerful, for linguistic and cultural reasons. Therefore it is possible to understand Calders' reaction of "seclusion" into some sort of realism. It is a realism, though, which transforms Mexican reality dramatically because the texts are written in Catalan and this is the language used by all characters except for a few exceptions; and Calders only presents real if shocking events without much manipulation. According to his declarations all plots derive from minor changes of newspapers reports.

Many Catalan authors living in Mexico at the time, such as Lluís Ferran de Pol or Vicenç Riera Llorca, always wrote from the perspective of the exiled. Calders, on the other hand, shows a keen interest in the native's perspective, although from the outsider's position. For instance, he observes and comments briefly on the situation of poor people and the problem of social injustice in Mexican society, without taking any position, just "showing" a situation. His interests follow the absurdities or the comical aspects of those events. This position is quite different from that of other foreign artists living in Mexico at the time. Luis Buñuel, the movie director from Calanda, for example, took impressive and powerful stands about Mexican reality in movies like "Nazarín."

Calders' relationship to Mexican culture takes yet another turn if

we compare it to the case of one of his masters, Josep Carner, who also lived in Mexico during World War II, and whose biography Calders wrote, paying special attention to the Mexican period of Carner's life. Carner's approach to Mexican culture in his articles and plays is radically different than that of Pere Calders. When writing a book review of a book by Alfonso Reyes, *Ultima Thule*, he used the occasion to introduce a reflection on the future of Catalan culture:

Que presideixi la cultura Europa o Amèrica, tenim la sort d'ésser un poble massa petit per a poder subsistir sense esperit d'universalitat i exigència de perfecció. I la nostra esperança ha d'ésser solidària de la d'aquests pobles americans; i han estat sortosos els fills de Catalunya que hagin après a estimar-los en l'honor de servir-los, en un contacte més íntim del que consenten els minsos intents espanyols de rescalfament d'un imperialisme, o les atencions somrients i una mica astorades dels casolans de París. (Carner 1985, 190)

"Esperit d'universalitat" and "exigència de perfecció," are two of the principles which Josep Carner followed during his entire life, principles he tried to instill to his fellow citizens and, in exile in the Americas, had a more profound if not tragic inflection. In fact, his commitment to a new land was so intense that he decided to write a few pieces dealing with Mexican motifs to express his old intimate preoccupations, religious doubts, destiny, absurdity (Bou 1990). Calders was much more interested in his personal quest for the absurdities of reality. Mexico offered him a natural playground to experiment. He stated: "Cal repetir que allò que nosaltres entenem per realitat, té a Mèxic una altra dimensió: la gent, allí, fa coses que en altres latituds cal inventar per als personatges ficticis." (Bath 121) These words may help us reread Said's important statement about what he calls "the struggle over geography", a complex struggle "about ideas, about forms, about images and imagining." In fact what we may understand is that Pere Calders endured a process of inverted colonization. Even though his stay in Mexico was lived from a European perspective, he learned enough about that culture, and was permeated by some of its traits, in a way that helped him re-address his own vision of reality and how to manipulate it through literary means. Nevertheless his work in general is very distant from a "magic realism" approach. The fantastic does not illuminate his fiction in the same way that it does for Latin-American writers, such as Alejo Carpentier or Horacio Quiroga. But when confronting the few pieces by Calders which exploit Mexican situations and characters one has to recognize that these are very realistic and offer little room for experimentation. Calders' contribution to the renovation of Catalan prose has been significant, and his reelaboration of imperialistic feelings has a role that has to be taken

into account. His prose is startlingly triumphant when applying Mexican views to Catalan reality.

ENRIC BOU  
BROWN UNIVERSITY

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